

Wanderers storm home after penalty decision

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Wycombe Wanderers 3, Bishop's Stort 0 REPORT BY STUART EARP

ONE decision by referee C. Gregory could have won Wycombe Wanderers the Rothmans Isthmian League title. It came in the 70th minute of Tuesday night's match against Bishop's Stortford at Loakes Park.

Steve Perrin ran into the penalty area where he was brought down by Martin Smith next to the bye-line. Mr. Gregory, right up with play, awarded a penalty which Dave Alexander drove into the net to throw a completely different complexion on this all-important game.

Wycombe had to win at all cost against Stortford — nothing else would do. For 70 minutes that task looked beyond them and then, after that penalty breakthrough, the game was transformed. Wanderers became a different side and finished the match 3-0 winners. Many people seeing this result in Wednesday's papers probably thought it was a comfortable cruise for Wycombe . . . it was anything but that.

In fact, had it not been for the penalty, I doubt whether the Blues would have scored at all, let alone land a 3-0 victory. For

those first 70 minutes, the tension of winning the championship weighed heavily on the players. That tension started before the match itself when Wycombe came out for their warm-up and then had to return to the dressing rooms for 10 minutes because the kick-off had been hastily changed to 7.45. That certainly didn't help matters and when the game got underway Wanderers looked decidedly nervous and jittery.

This was reflected in the goalscoring chances. They created only one in the first half and as the game wore on, things were beginning to look bleak. Even the crowd turned against manager Brian Lee when he took off Tony Horseman and brought on Steve Perrin. In fact, Lee's move probably won the match and turned the boos into cheers.

In the first quarter, it was obvious Wycombe were being affected by the occasion. They looked nervous and worried. Stortford didn't help by committing a series of niggling fouls

which succeeded in throwing the champions out of their stride.

Over anxious, Wycombe sent their passes astray and by half time, had only one clear strike at goal. It came in the 41st minute when Evans' header was cleared off the line by John Mears with England Schoolboy goalkeeper Lee Smelt, completely beaten.

Things didn't improve in the second half. Evans in particular struggled to find any sort of form and at one time, could scarcely put a foot right. The defence too, were starting to make elementary mistakes and they, almost let in Woodrow in the 57th minute after Pete Watson crossed from the bye-line. John Maskell saved the situation by gathering well.

The tension was increasing. The crowd, growing more and more disillusioned with Evans, began to chant for Perrin. The manager made his move in the 60th minute. Lee decided to pull off Horseman. The crowd expected Evans to go and voiced their feelings. The pattern con-

tinued with Wycombe unable to break down Stortford's massed defences. At the best of times, the visitors played only a couple of men up front.

There were the odd glimpses of the skills that have taken Wycombe 20 league games without defeat but by now passes were being pumped up-field in hope. Then came the decisive incident — one that could prove the difference between the title and a place in the top three.

Perrin, substitute because of a bruised leg, latched onto a pass from midfield. Beating Smith, he raced into the box and was on the line when Smith crashed in. The referee awarded the penalty, deciding that the players had slid out of the area after the offence was committed. He pointed to the spot. Wanderers were then faced with a problem. Horseman had been replaced 15 minutes earlier and there was no recognised penalty taker in the side. Brian Lee left his 'box' and instructed Alexander to take it. Although Alex hadn't taken a penalty for over a year in a competitive match, he bent the ball perfectly to the goalkeeper's left.

Then it all started. The fans, who had been strangely quiet early on, roared every time Wycombe crossed half-way. The players responded to their chants and for the first time, began to play with real confidence — confidence that had drained away by the minute earlier in the game. Holifield drove over the top, Searle missed with only Smelt to beat . . . the chances came thick and fast.

Stortford, their defensive policy shattered, came out to attack and left their defence unguarded. Wanderers took their opportunity and snatched two more goals inside five minutes.

In the 81st minute Wycombe broke up a Stortford attack. The ball came out to Evans who sent a superb through ball over the defence — probably one of the best passes at Loakes Park this season. It dipped over Mears and bounced into the path of Perrin who had raced through the defence, anticipating the move. Five yards clear of the nearest defender, Steve raced on. Smelt stayed on his line, only advancing at the last second and thus allowing Perrin to place his shot expertly into the net. The timing of the drive was perfect.

Five minutes later it was 3-0. Evans and Searle worked the ball through the middle with Stortford's back four stretched to the limit. Unselfishly Searle slipped a pass through to Perrin who ran on and again gave the goalkeeper no chance with a faultless finish. It was all over. Wycombe, carefree by now, could have made it five when Evans had a shot deflected for a corner and Mead saw a header blocked but by then it didn't matter — Wanderers were home and dry for their ninth £40 bonus this term.

Those three goals have improved the goal average — a factor that looks almost certain to decide this year's championship. The Blues need now to beat Dagenham on Saturday for the title. If they carry on where they left off on Tuesday it will be theirs.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, G. Hand; D. Alexander, T. Reardon, M. Holifield; A. Horseman (sub. Perrin 60 mins.), K. Searle, D. Evans.

STORTFORD: L. Smelt; J. Mears, M. Smith, T. Blacktin, I. Johnson; T. Woodrow (sub. R. Little 59 mins.), P. Leakey, K. Mulken, D. Lawrence; P. Watson, J. McKenzie.

Referee: C. Gregory (Woking).

Half-time: 0-0. **Goalscorers:**

Wycombe — Alexander, pen (70); Perrin 2 (81, 86).

Official paying attendance: 1,964.

Approximate total attendance: 2,350.